

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

College Admission Essays

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Understand how to craft
a gripping essay about you

Make sense of personal statement
and supplemental prompts

Create a foolproof plan to
complete your applications

Jessica Brenner

College Admissions Expert and
Private Counselor



College Admission Essays

2nd edition

**by Jessica Brenner
and Geraldine Woods**

**for
dummies**
A Wiley Brand

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Introduction

Getting into college can be extremely difficult. More students are applying to four-year universities than ever before, tuition is higher than ever, and the number of college campuses has stayed almost exactly the same. There are no guarantees when it comes to college applications.

And yet one aspect of college admissions has never been more important: college essays. The impression you make and the stories you share can tip the scales in your favor and distinguish you from the thousands of other applicants with the exact same GPA and test scores. Whether you've been an aspiring storyteller since you first picked up a pen or the thought of writing anything longer than a text message makes you want to hide under the covers, you *are* capable of crafting memorable college essays. This book can explain how to write creatively, authentically, and *well* — giving you the best possible chance at admissions. Just as important, a well-paced writing process can help you discover valuable insights about yourself (and it's ideal that you know yourself well before going off to college) and even be enjoyable — much more so than working yourself into a frenzy days before your deadlines.

This second edition of *College Admission Essays For Dummies* gives you a road map around what I call *essay sand traps* (those unsubstantiated claims, vagueness, and cliched topics, among other things) that can sabotage your application, as well as strategies used by the most successful applicants. This book helps you decide what to write and then guides you through the process of creating essays that present your best self to the admissions committee. Because many scholarships

require personal statements, this book may also pay off in cold, hard cash. Moreover, you'll find this new edition useful even after you plunk down your last tuition payment. Chances are a few employment-related letters and essays are in your future, especially if you're applying for internships or jobs on the professional level.

About This Book

If you're applying for admission or hoping that your eloquent essays will translate into scholarship money, you probably already have your hands full: You're asking for letters of recommendation, tracking down your Social Security Number, and assembling that resume you've been tinkering with for months. You don't need another chore, but you do need help. Never fear. This book demystifies the process of writing an application essay — from topic search through final draft, without wasting your time. Of course, I like to imagine you glued to these pages, devouring every syllable, but I'm a realist.

You can find information on the following topics (and so much more):

- » A questionnaire — a personal inventory — that helps you discover the best topics for your essays
- » Proven techniques for jump-starting your creative process
- » Techniques to gather ideas, focus on a topic, and choose the best structure for your essay and how you can seek help without violating any university, school, parental, or personal code of honesty
- » Tactics to demystify the rough draft, including why you should “show” not “tell” your story and the lowdown

on topic sentences, use of detail, and strong introductions and conclusions

- » Tips on overcoming writer's block
- » Ways to put the finishing touches on a final draft
- » Methods to finalizing your essays and knowing when you're done writing (for some, the tinkering and tweaking stage can go on forever!)
- » Pointers on grammar and spelling without all those horrible terms that English teachers love so much and help with choosing the best tone, creating transitions, and avoiding wordiness and repetition
- » Examples of real admission essays from students who were very happy when the colleges of their choice mailed out decision letters
- » Guidance on how to address the most familiar types of *supplemental essays* (which are essays used to supplement your personal statement) and some uncommon question types, too

Foolish Assumptions

Although you know what “they” say about assumptions, here are a few assumptions I make about you:

- » You want to choose — and be chosen for — the best possible university, and you understand that essay writing is a major component in ensuring your success.
- » You may be just a little insecure about writing, maybe not with regards to the usual English-report sort of paper, but certainly the “let-me-tell-you-about-myself” type of essay. And who isn't insecure about such a task? After all, summing up a life experience, at the age of 17 or the age of 71, is daunting.

» You're aware of the wealth of information available to you — with regards to deadlines, application guidance, and major do's and don'ts of essay writing — but that the information you read or hear is often conflicting and confusing. Sifting through it and creating your own manageable plan might feel just a *bit* out of reach.

Everything in *College Admission Essays For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is intended to calm your anxieties, improve your writing skills, and help you complete your application essays on time and on target.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book are little signs located in the margins to guide you toward important information. Here's what each sign means:



TIP The material accompanying this icon is more valuable than a message from a jockey about the favorite's chances to win the sixth race. The Tip icon alerts you to shortcuts, ways to improve writing style, and other helpful hints for writing a successful college admission essay.



REMEMBER This icon contains helpful content — you know, stuff worth remembering! Think of this icon as a speedbump asking you to slow down for a moment and take note of guidance.



WARNING The Warning icon is like the sturdy fence at the edge of a cliff. This icon tells you how to sidestep the most common errors of admission essays and prevent some seriously nasty falls.

Beyond This Book

This book is chock-full of examples, tips and tricks, and other pieces of helpful advice so you can write a college admission essay that can wow the admissions team and help you get into your dream school. If you want some additional tidbits of wisdom, check out the book's Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com. Just search for "College Admission Essay Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

Head to the Table of Contents and index to see what's where. Then turn to the chapters that deal with the part of the process currently tying your stomach into a knot. After you've grasped what you need to do, plop yourself in front of the computer and get to work. Keep a copy of the book nearby, so the next time you're stuck, you can turn to the respective chapter in this book for more assistance.

For instance, if you've already finalized your college list, you may want to start by making a list of essay questions and deadlines. You may also consider beginning where most students do: by exploring the prompts and various approaches to the Common Application personal statement (a more thorough explanation of why this comes first is in [Chapter 1](#)). As you begin to understand

your strengths and weaknesses as a writer, dip into the different chapters that address the parts of the writing process most likely to be hard for you. And take heart: You *will* write your college essays and you *will* survive the application era of your life.

My personal goal for this book is that any student coming out of any high school will be able to read it and get the information needed and deserved — for the price of a paperback or ebook. I want to put maximum control and empowerment in your hands. I hope the information in the coming chapters serves as a guide, inspires your curiosity, generates ideas, and overall makes you feel prepared as you tackle this important process in the manner that is right for you.

Part 1

Putting Yourself on Paper

IN THIS PART ...

Understand the role of college essays in your college application process.

Create a timeline and plan based on the number of essays required by the colleges to which you're applying and the deadlines you hope to meet.

Consider various approaches to the Common Application writing prompts (and other prompts you're likely to encounter).

Reflect on your experiences and relationships to begin brainstorming for your college essays.

Gain an understanding of the genre and process of college essay writing.

Master the central do's and don'ts you should be aware of before you begin writing.

Chapter 1

Becoming More Than a Statistic: What the Essay Does for You

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Taking a look at yourself as the subject
 - » Knowing your audience
 - » Creating a timetable for writing
 - » Discovering how to live your life while writing the essay
 - » Focusing on the process of essay writing
 - » Maintaining a sense of perspective during the application process
-

When's the last time you answered the question "Who are you?" with this response:

I'm a B average and a 1230 SAT. Pleased to meet you!

Not recently, I bet. Yet for the most part your admissions or scholarship application answers the "Who are you?" question in just that way. But you're *not* a standardized test score or a list of grades. You're a person. The admission essay is your chance to become more than a number to those who judge your candidacy.

In this chapter I explain *why* essays are a part of the college application process and *what* your writing should accomplish. I also tackle *when* — an important issue for people who are frantically overworked (in other words, everybody).

Understanding Why the Essay Is Your Key Opportunity

Most of my students begin the college essay writing process knowing very little, if anything, about the genre of personal or narrative writing. In fact, many of them are eager to discuss their test scores, their resume, their GPA — anything to shift the focus away from college essays. After all, writing an admission essay (or more than likely a series of essays — more on that in [Part 4](#)) about *yourself* feels murky and even vulnerable. How do you succeed?

Consider this analogy: A pile of forms is a pile of forms. Nothing's deeply personal about the information on a typical application: your name, address, Social Security number, date and place of birth, courses and grades, extracurricular activities, and standardized test scores. All that information is important. But you have *one* real opportunity to stop your readers — the admissions counselors sitting on the admissions committee — in their tracks. You may have the opportunity to follow up with an interview, but your writing is often be the first and only chance to tell your story in a way that will make it impossible for them to refuse you as a candidate for admission.

The chapters in [Parts 1](#) and [2](#) help you reflect on your upbringing, the challenges you've faced, and other influences in your life to figure out the story (or stories) your application would be incomplete without. Maybe that includes your struggle to overcome your fear of physics and the 22 consecutive lunch hours you gave up in order to construct the perfect magnetism experiment. Or the change in your worldview after you read Virginia Woolf's great novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Numbers and basic data can't possibly convey your burning desire for social justice or passion for visual arts. Yet those factors are as much a part of you as your A in English or C in physical education.

Granted, the letters of recommendation submitted with your application may address your personality and experiences. However, you have no control over the content of those letters, and frankly, not all recommendation writers actually know how to write well. Their letters may be vague and limited to the scope of what they've seen from you in class. The only way you can be sure that the application paints a true portrait of you is to write at length about yourself. Enter the essay. Specifically, an admission essay can

- » Show how you react to challenging situations ("When Coach asked me what really happened, I ...")
- » Reveal your values and priorities ("Nothing is more important to me than ...")
- » Explain factors in your background that have influenced you ("Growing up on the summit of Mount Everest, I ...")
- » Interpret your academic record ("I used to believe that I would never be an A student ...")

- » Discuss how you will contribute to the life of the institution (“I would love to join your chapter of ...”)
- » Relate the reasons why you and the institution mesh well (“I am attracted to the American Studies major because ...”)
- » Display your logic and writing skills (“Ultimately, I’ve realized that ...”)

Factoring in Holistic Review and Test-Optional Schools

The writing was on the wall long before the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of Chicago and the University of California went *test optional* in 2018 and early 2020, respectively — meaning that, for the first time, prospective students could apply without submitting any standardized test scores. By the fall of 2020, more than 1,500 schools were on the test-optional list — and many counselors like me knew that there would be no going back. Sure enough, many of these schools extended test-optional policies into the 2021-2022 admissions cycle and beyond.

Truth be told, colleges and universities have been debating the merit of the SAT (and ACT) for a while, with the term “holistic review” simultaneously factoring into many schools’ admissions process. *Holistic review* refers to the process of evaluating candidates in terms of what they can contribute to a college campus and their qualities as a whole, not simply the metric of their GPA and test scores. (Schools like the University of Oregon, the University of Washington, and Louisiana State

University have embraced the concept of holistic review for several years now.) With mounting data showing that wealthier students with greater access to resources (private schools, extensive tutoring, and so on) have advantages concerning standardized tests, using test scores as a metric of student performance is misleading.



REMEMBER So what does all of this business about the SAT mean for you, future essay writer? It means that, unlike other factors used in college admissions, the opportunity to introduce and distinguish yourself as a candidate *in your own words* has never been more important. Isn't it a relief to know that colleges will see you as more than a number?

Given that what colleges most want to learn about is *you* — the you beyond the numbers and statistics — the next few sections cover what you can keep in mind (and what not to worry about) as you begin to brainstorm what experience and characteristics you want to share in your essays.

Forgetting about strategy

“What do they want to read? I'll say anything!” Sound familiar? If so, you're hanging out with the wrong crowd. Too many applicants expend far too much energy attempting to analyze the admissions office, creating myths such as these:

- » **Every college has a magic topic that guarantees admission.** “If you want to go to an Ivy League school, write about how worldly and well-traveled you are.” “*A/ways* mention winter sports in your essay for the University of Colorado.” Rumors like these spread quickly, but they're a waste of time. Anyone who

claims to know tricks that guarantee admission is indulging in wishful thinking.

- » **One mistake can sink your application.** “She uses semicolons? Dump her.” “This guy spent four years in the debating society. He’s gonna argue with everyone. Out he goes.” Gimme a break. If you write the truth about yourself, you don’t have to worry about breaking a rule you only imagine exists. You’ll either get in or you won’t, but your semicolon habit will have nothing to do with the outcome.
- » **Some topics are automatic turn-offs.** Various authority figures tell you with great confidence never to write about the Big Game, the death of a relative, or some other particular topic they’ve labeled taboo. Nonsense. Although a few topics can be especially hard to pull off (an essay about your first romantic relationship comes to mind), no topic is off limits if you handle it well and keep it focused on you. (See [Chapter 2](#) for how to handle it well.)
- » **If a particular topic worked for one student, it will work for all.** “Jenelle wrote about paperclips, and she got into her first choice, so I’m going with a description of my office supplies.” Good idea? No. Okay, reading other people’s work may give you valuable tips on style and format. That’s why I scattered some real student essays throughout this book and in the Appendix. But content is a different story. Jenelle didn’t get in because of the paperclips. She got in because of a host of factors you know nothing about, and she pulled off an essay that was probably highly memorable, but not worth trying to duplicate. The moral of the story: Write your own essay and forget about everyone else’s.

To correct other misconceptions about the admission essay, read [Chapter 21](#).

Choosing authenticity

In this section I state what the admissions officers *do* want to see in potential applicants. Keep the following in mind:

- » **Self-awareness:** Have you ever noticed that when someone is truly honest about themselves, you're more than willing to forgive them a flaw or two? Or even that a moderate dose of self-deprecating humor makes someone *much* more likeable than a moderate dose of arrogance? That's because *self-awareness*, or knowing yourself well, is a great way to ensure that you can navigate your future relationships and responsibilities — flaws and all.



REMEMBER Know yourself before you go to college, and that's why the Common Application prompts (see the next section for more about the specific prompts) focus on getting you to reflect on the person you actually are and how you came to be that way. Granted, you should still present your best self, meaning if you choose to share what you might see as a shortcoming or personal challenge, you also want to showcase your efforts to grow. But your best self is still *yourself*, not someone else.

- » **Authenticity:** College admission essays are far more than a recap of your resume or a recitation of your achievements. In fact, being authentic and, above all, *true to yourself* is exactly what colleges want to see from you. Do they care that you're a human and willing to admit imperfection? No, because a student